

College Station Independent School District

Success...each child...each day...each hour

April 14, 2008

Senator Shapiro, Representative Eissler, and Members of the Council

I'm Charlotte Slack. I am a member of the College Station ISD Board of Trustees and want to share with you a board member's view of the accountability system. I will address the following:

1. how the accountability system impacts our district
2. the data elements our board finds most useful
3. some unintended consequences of the current system, and
4. ideas for improvement.

Let me start by addressing how the accountability system impacts our district's operations:

We recently established a long-range education planning committee to focus on our district's future. One of the 40 distinguished community members on the committee who is the head of one of our hospitals equated the school accountability system to hospital accountability systems. As the CEO, he and his staff are committed to "staying off the list" of non-compliance in all areas of hospital services. Then the hospital moves on to provide the medical care it is expected to deliver. He suggested that our district do the same: meet the minimum expectations of the accountability mandates, i.e. "stay off the list," then move on to provide the education for our students that our residents expect us to deliver.

Unfortunately, in Texas, simply staying "off the non-compliance list" is an overwhelming task. The accountability system monitors virtually every aspect of district operations and in doing so, drives the decisions of our administrators, teachers and our school board.

Which accountability data do school board members find most useful?

As a board, we focus on 1) our students' TAKS passing rates in all subjects and grade levels and 2) high school graduation rates. These data drive our budget priorities in allocating our staff and financial resources. For example, we use the data to identify where students are struggling. For students who have failed TAKS or are identified as at-risk of failing, we provide one-on-one tutoring and after-school classes with the transportation necessary for them to get home. We hold parent meetings to explain the importance of the TAKS test and to recruit their help supporting their students' efforts to pass the test. Our administrative team uses the same data to drive nearly all management decisions. Staying "off the list" is not an easy task.

1812 Welsh Street
College Station, TX 77840
979-764-5455 FAX 979-764-5535

EDDIE COULSON, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

I would like to comment about the unintended consequences of the current accountability system. There are several, but I'll focus on four:

1) Testing has become the primary concern as teachers plan for their students. Concepts not covered on the TAKS test have little chance of finding a place in the busy hours of a school day. Non-tested subjects fall victim to neglect in this system. The broad range of arts, creativity, technology, social interactions, citizenship, gifted student programs and trade skills are but a few

of the learning opportunities that receive short shrift in TAKS-driven goals. As such, mandated testing removes most local control from our boards. We aim for high achievement, but in the end, we most work to "stay off the list." It's not a choice. It's reality.

2) An inordinate amount of time and financial resources are devoted to meeting the accountability requirements. Our district of 9,1000 students has a Ph.D. Executive Director of Accountability and a full staff of support personnel to deal with the testing and reporting requirements for both the state accountability system and the differing NCLB requirements, because the two systems are not totally aligned. For example, simply identifying teachers who met the status of "highly qualified" was a major staff effort. He and our Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction visit each of our 12 campuses three times each year for lengthy strategy meetings on passing the TAKS tests. And, we had to hire a full time district testing coordinator to assure that we are following the detailed training, security, and administration requirements for the TAKS test. In addition, our high school also has its own full-time testing coordinator. In my printed testimony, I'm including a link to our assessment calendar <http://www.csisd.org/pages/calendars.html> which is five pages long and lists approximately 75 dates for various kinds of testing, not counting summer assessments. Approximately 40% of our school days involve testing in the district.

3) Our parents have little hope of understanding the complex accountability systems. Parents want to know only two things: 1) the rating of their children's campus to decide if it's a good school or a struggling school, and 2) their own children's ability to pass the tests. A rating system should be easy to explain to residents who pay for our schools. Having two distinct and sometimes conflicting accountability systems creates a complexity that undermines the value of having any accountability system. For example, we have a campus that is rated acceptable under the state system and yet failed to meet AYP under NCLB. We seem to be measuring failure rather than progress. What message is a parent supposed to take away from the conflicting rating of that school?

4) Teacher stress related to ensuring that each and every student passes all tests is nearly indescribable. When I was in the classroom, one of my colleagues casually mentioned that she had made her annual dental appointment. It was TAKS time and once again, she was grinding her teeth. Dedicated, highly-qualified teachers step in front of our children while suffering from sleep deprivation, headaches, irritability, and short tempers. It's not a healthy environment in which to teach, and it's not a healthy environment in which to learn. Certainly unintended, but nonetheless true, teacher stress is transferred to students. Students are over tested and over stressed. On TAKS testing days, students across the state succumb to tears, upset stomachs,

headaches, fatigue, and jittery nerves such that peak performance on the one day of the test is nearly impossible. As such, is our accountability system really measuring student learning?

I have some suggestions for improving the accountability system:

1) Simplify state testing requirements. For example, remove as many tests as possible, perhaps moving to alternate years or even every three years for reading and math, thereby reducing the numbers of tests required per child per year. This cuts administrative costs dramatically, but more importantly, it limits the number of tests a child is required to take. Fewer tests translate to more time for teachers to teach and for children to learn. And, just because the state is not administering a standardized test does not mean that teachers are not quizzing and testing their students to ensure subject matter mastery at regular intervals.

2) Combine a student's TAKS scores with other measures of success over a year's time to present a more accurate description of achievement than one test on one day can provide. The end-of-course tests on the high school level are one welcome move in that direction.

3) Include students' improvement over a period of time as more significant measure of learning than meeting a single proficiency standard. For example, a student who gains improves his/her proficiency by 10 percentage points over last year but still fails to meet a passing standard should not be counted as failing. A system that rewards improvement is far more motivating for all stakeholders than one that imposes sanctions for failure to meet a specific proficiency target.

Please understand that as a former teacher and now a board member, I believe that accountability is absolutely necessary and benefits our state. No longer can we brag about our outstanding students while ignoring those who do not succeed. Our district motto is, "Success each life, each day, each hour." We live that motto. We want every child to be counted and held accountable. But if we want to teach our students to love to learn and we want to attract teachers who love to teach, we need an accountability system that recognizes improvement rather than one that merely punishes failure.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue.

Sincerely,

Charlotte Slack
College Station ISD Board Trustee
2301 Ferguson Circle
College Station, Texas 77845
cbs200@gmail.com
(h) 979-693-2438
(c) 979-255-1680